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Emotions, loss and change: Armenian women and post-socialist transformations in Nagorny Karabakh

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Based on empirical data obtained from ethnographic fieldwork in Nagorny Karabakh (NK), the article analyses gender as one fundamental but neglected dimension of post-conflict society. In particular, this article examines changing gender relations as a result of the political transformations occurring during and after the Karabakh conflict (1990-2000). The focus is on two groups of women residing in Martuni, a small town in NK. The first group includes local Armenian women, the second Armenian women from Azerbaijan, forced to resettle in Martuni. In this way, the article not only explores how the status of these women and their dependency has changed as a result of the political transformations, but also how gender roles and identities are negotiated when the region of resettlement is not completely unfamiliar to new arrivals. The article concludes by highlighting these Armenian women's contradictory, yet similar experiences in terms of prevalent gender constructions. In doing so, the article expands research on gender and political transformations in post-socialist regions and beyond.

Key words: Nagorny Karabakh, gender, post-socialist, displacement, political transformations, petty trading, patriarchy

Introduction

In February 1988, people in the Nagorny Karabakh (NK) region, and in Armenia and Azerbaijan, were faced with a tense political situation when riots broke out in Sumgait, following peaceful demonstrations demanding the merging of NK with the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. A total of 32 people were killed in Sumgait, many were injured and thousands fled in panic (Kurkchiyan 2005, 153-54). Eventually communal clashes between Armenians and Azeris escalated into a full-scale bloody conflict (1991-1994). The Karabakh conflict led to a complete collapse of society and created an unregulated, chaotic and often

bloody exchange of populations between Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK. On the Azerbaijani side, the conflict created more than 700,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki 1994, 99).[1] An estimated 350,000 ethnic Armenians fled Azerbaijan in two waves (1988 and 1990) after anti-Armenian violence (ibid.).

Despite being ethnically Armenian, Armenians from Azerbaijan who had to resettle in NK as a result of the conflict first encountered marginalisation and exclusion. This group of Armenians faced several dilemmas: they had been violently expelled from Azerbaijan for their Armenian ethnicity, but in NK they were often viewed as outsiders, who were considered to have lost some of their 'Armenianness' as a result of living in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. When they left Azerbaijan, many of them had been dispossessed of everything they had, only to face resettlement in a chronically impoverished and war-torn region. Before the conflict, NK had been a region where they would visit relatives and friends in the summer; during and after the conflict these relatives and friends helped them to resettle in NK. However, those who fled from Azerbaijani cities such as Baku, in particular, struggled to cope with the change from life in a prosperous city to impoverished rural conditions.

Ethnographic studies on gender and conflict have shown how refugees or internally displaced persons reinvent new identities and strategies to cope with the traumatic dislocation from their familiar physical and sociocultural contexts in the unfamiliar places of resettlement. In this context, gender identities and gender roles are significant and contested identity markers, in that they often cross-culturally differ and can be transmitted in the new host society to new settings following older models, created anew, re-negotiated or transformed in response to changing circumstances. Nonetheless, the question arises as to how gender roles and identities are negotiated when the region of resettlement is not completely unfamiliar to new arrivals. In fact, how are gender identities transmitted and contested when people consider the region of resettlement to be part of what they call their

original 'homeland' and both locals, as well as new arrivals, are supposedly members of 'one' people, as is the case with those Armenians compelled to leave Azerbaijan to resettle, permanently or temporarily, in NK as a result of the conflict?

Based on empirical data obtained from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Martuni, a small town and administrative centre in one of the five districts of NK, this article explores these complex questions by examining changing gender relations in the period 1990-2000, a period marked by ethnic conflict and post-conflict developments in NK.[2] Nona Shahnazarian started her research in 2000, and has returned to NK every year since then.[3] Ulrike Ziemer made a fieldwork trip to the region in 2009.[4] In this paper, we draw on biographical interviews with 28 local Armenian women and 24 Armenian women formerly from Azerbaijan who resettled in Martuni as a result of the conflict.[5] Both researchers let the interview participants choose the location for their interview – private apartments, workplaces and other locations where the research participants felt comfortable. Cafés were not an option, because it is not often considered appropriate for women in Martuni to sit on their own in public.

The vast majority of the literature on NK provides an analysis of the conflict, including its history; causes and origins (Cheterian 2012; de Waal 2003; Parseghian 2007). Another strand of the literature explores the importance of the contested area of NK for Armenian national identity (Stern 2003; Suny 2001; Walker 1996). However, although there is an emerging body of literature which focuses on post-conflict developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) (Broers 2013; Caspersen 2008; de Waal 2012; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008; Smolnik 2012), the gender realities in Karabakh's post-war society are hardly addressed. Only a few researchers have examined how gender and identities have been affected by the conflict itself and post-conflict developments (Beukian 2014; Dudwick 1997; Shahnazarian 2008, 2011; Shahnazarian and Ziemer 2012).

To examine the complexity of these experiences and the ways in which ethnic conflict and political changes have transformed the gender order in NK, we first briefly introduce our definition of gender and the way that gender has been constructed according to Armenian traditions, as well as during Soviet times. We then examine the ways in which Armenian women from Azerbaijan felt marginalised in NK upon their arrival. Third, we explore how the status of women and their dependency has changed as a result of post-conflict and societal transformations. Fourth, we discuss petty trading as a coping strategy; and we conclude by highlighting women's contradictory experiences as a result of the conflict and the political transformations that occurred after the collapse of communism.

Framing gender: Armenian tradition, socialism and conflict

Gender is omnipresent as a social category in society. In this analysis, gender is considered the site of interplay between structure and agency, discourse and practices, ideology and subjectivity. Gender, like other social categories, including ethnic identity, is constructed in a process within a specific social reality. This reality is not fixed but changes over time and thus gender attributes and gender behaviour also change. Scott (1986) characterises gender as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and a primary way of signifying relationships of power. Gender relations become established at particular periods of time and in particular contexts, reflecting the dominance of specific ways of being masculine or feminine (Connell 1998). Each society prescribes different activities and characteristics for males and females, which may be perceived as 'natural,' but are at the same time produced according to societal discourses.

Throughout history patriarchal gender relations have shaped Armenian society. To this day, the idea of women being subservient to Armenian men is conveyed, for example during

Armenian wedding ceremonies, where the groom is asked by the priest 'Do you speak for her?' (*Ter es?*) and the groom answers 'Yes, I speak for her' (*Ter em*), while the bride is asked 'Are you submissive?' (*Hnazand es?*) and she answers 'Yes, I am submissive' (*Hnazand em*). Although today, Armenian women in NK or Armenia have many more rights and freedoms than in the past, these wedding vows seem to remain central in the hierarchy of gender relations amongst Armenians. Armenian daughters are expected to be submissive to their fathers and are brought up anticipating their future roles as wife and mother. Married women are expected to be good housekeepers and to put their husbands and children before their individual needs and feelings.

According to Armenian tradition, the life-cycle of Armenian women can be divided into four periods (Ishkanian 2004; Shahnazarian 2011; Ter-Sarkisiants 1998; Ziemer 2010). In almost every period of her life, an Armenian woman's positioning is oriented towards married life and child-rearing. While the first stage, growing up as a child, is characterised by a modest life in her parents' home, where a daughter is under the control of male relatives, chiefly her father, the second stage is characterised by getting married and leaving her parents' house. Marriage carries a huge emotional weight in Armenian society as the culminating moment in a woman's life (Ziemer 2011, 135). This stage is also marked by a transition from being controlled by the father and other male relatives to being controlled by the husband's relatives. The third stage is the stage of motherhood and child-rearing and as Beukian (2014) demonstrates, for the Armenian nation it is almost like a national expression, constructed as a unique Armenian trait that distinguishes Armenian women from 'others'. The fourth and final stage is the highest status of an 'older woman', for example, when she becomes a mother-in-law. This stage is perceived as a reward for a life devoted to serving the interests of the family (Shahnazarian 2011).

The family can be seen as a very important value and symbol in Armenian culture and retains its significance today (Ziemer 2011, 136).[6] The father, as the head of the household, is considered the 'keeper of the household flame' (*dahn odjakhi tsooghuh bahoghuh*) because he goes out into the world and works to protect his home and family (Ishkanian 2004, 267). The mother is considered 'the hearth (*odjakh*) of the home', selflessly supporting her husband and taking care of the home (Ishkanian 2004, 267; Ziemer 2011, 136). Consequently, the only female life-strategies that are approved and promoted are those which include the creation of a 'complete' family, marked by the presence of husband and children (Shahnazarian 2011, 58). This requires an Armenian woman to serve all members of her husband's family. Sacrifice and endurance are central attributes for Armenian women. According to Shahnazarian (2011), an Armenian woman's sacrifices correspond to the romanticised and idealised cultural norms of Armenian women as victims; as passive, submissive, gentle and silent (Ziemer 2011, 136).

In contrast to Armenian gender traditions, the Soviet government officially proclaimed the establishment of gender equality. The Soviet government's commitment to equality between the sexes was demonstrated by the introduction of policies that guaranteed, for example, equal pay, the right to abortion and the reorganisation of domestic labour and childcare (Buckley 1985; Fertaly 2012). Bolshevik leaders, such as Aleksandra Kollontai, the head of the Party's women's division until early 1922, thought that the family was the site of women's oppression (Ashwin 2000, 5). Nonetheless, a wealth of publications has shown that in reality these policies did little to challenge traditional gender divisions, male domination in the public sphere remained largely unquestioned and women continued to face a so-called 'double burden' of work and home life (Corrin 1992). It is now widely accepted that, despite promoting women's emancipation and equal opportunities for women in the public sphere and state policies, state socialism served to enhance traditional patriarchy. The formal structures

of socialist society formed by the state, as well as the geographical separation of public and private spheres, heightened traditional gender identity as a cultural resource for both survival and resistance (Watson 1993, 472).

The demise of the Soviet Union prompted a re-evaluation of Soviet gender politics and as research has shown many post-socialist countries, including Armenia and NK, experienced a certain 're-traditionalisation'; that is, a rise of traditional notions of gender as a way of dealing with the allegedly 'distorted' Soviet past (Ashwin 2000; Beukian 2014). The collapse of state socialism across Eastern Europe resulted in dramatic economic and societal changes which had particular effects on women as previous forms and structures of work and lifestyle either disappeared or were radically transformed. It seems that democratising processes have often transformed women into domestic goddesses or made them into heroines of survival (Bridger et al. 1996). However, with the demise of old structures, new structures and opportunities in the labour market have led women to new opportunities for self-realisation (Turbine and Riach 2012). In short, these contradictions between traditional gender roles and emancipation still continue to dictate women's lives in many post-socialist regions.

Just as changing gender relations in post-socialist regions have been an analytical focus in feminist writings, the impact on gender relations of regional conflicts resulting from political transformations in Eastern Europe has also developed into a prominent topic of investigation. Towards the end of the twentieth century, in particular, regional conflicts took an immense toll on populations. With these developments, the literature on women and war has increased with a particular growing emphasis on the impact of war on women. The literature emphasizes a number of concerns. First, women in most countries form the centre of the family and bear the economic and social burden of keeping families together throughout times of upheaval and during post-conflict reconstruction (Buckley 1997). In this strand of the literature, women are an important part of nationalist struggles and are portrayed as 'mothers

of the nation', as for example in Serbia (Bracewell 2000) and NK and Armenia (Beukian 2014). Second, there is the bulk of the literature that examines the transformation of women's gender roles and identities as a result of the migration and displacement engendered by conflict (Al-Ali 2002; Franz 2003; Huisman and Honagneu-Sotelo 2005; Markovic and Manderson 2000; Pilkington 1998).[7]

Uprooted and unwanted

The Karabakh conflict created an unregulated, chaotic and often violent exchange of populations between Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK. Most Azerbaijani Armenians settled in Armenia and/or Russia. These internally displaced persons, men and or women alike, were at first warmly welcomed; they received substantial support and were housed in hotels, holiday complexes or other state accommodation across Yerevan. When the political situation worsened and resources became exhausted, they were recommended to move far away from Yerevan into the houses which had been left by Azerbaijanis fleeing from Armenia. However, as Lusine[8] recalls, such a move was not welcomed by most Armenians from Azerbaijan, least of all those from Baku, since they were used to an urban life in the capital city and now had to move to the country:

> "I was in so much despair that I cried day and night. I hated the people around me – they who only spoke of *azg* ['nation' in Armenian]. I hated Karabakh, though I was born here and grew up here. I wanted to move far away, to Russia, or even further, even to hell (*dzhaannem* [in the Azeri language and the Karabakh Armenian dialect])…"

In Karabakh itself, everything began with a great deal of euphoria and, to some extent, naïve romanticism. In February 1988, when the first demonstrations started, most of the internally displaced people who had been the first to leave Azerbaijan were reluctant to participate in developing events. They had left Azerbaijan with the intention of temporarily resettling in NK before returning to Azerbaijan once the situation calmed down. Most of these internally

displaced persons were women and their children, sent to safety by their husbands, who promised to follow them soon. While many Armenians from Azerbaijan did not engage in the demonstrations, most locals, even women and children, participated in the Karabakh movement. Many Azerbaijani Armenians opposed the whole idea of the Karabakh movement because it jeopardised their peaceful way of life in cosmopolitan Baku (Grant 2010) or other industrial cities in Azerbaijan. During an interview, Ruzanna, who left Baku in 1988 when the first riots broke out, spoke of her anger and frustration in the early days of the Karabakh conflict:

> "Karabakh will be damned if it has taken three of my sons! Even if Karabakh is burnt to the ground, what has this got to do with me! I had different plans for my life than chanting in the square [in Martuni] like a lunatic."

It is worth mentioning here that Baku, like many other towns in Azerbaijan where Armenians lived, had an atmosphere of Soviet multiculturalism, where different peoples lived peacefully together, united as one Soviet family of nations (Grant 2010). In this respect, Armenians from Azerbaijan and Armenians in general can be understood as relatively loyal to the Soviet Union (Suny 2005), and many of them, just like other peoples in the Soviet Union, had internalised the idea of a 'people's friendship' and Soviet multiculturalism.[9] As they noticeably lacked this widespread enthusiasm for the movement, these first Armenians from Azerbaijan were often called traitors to the nation (*azgi davatchan*) and in everyday life there were incidents of verbal clashes between Azerbaijani Armenians and locals in NK. These, however, were motivated not only by their lack of enthusiasm for the Karabakh movement, but were also connected to the general level of poverty in NK. Even in Soviet times, Karabakh suffered from general shortages – worse here than in many other regions. When more internally displaced persons came to NK the shortages increased and led to a general rejection of these new arrivals by the local population, as Alina remembers:

> "Frankfurters and other sausages were delivered to the *prodmag* (supermarket), but in these times [Soviet times] this was rare. I found a place in the queue, but people began to argue. An embittered woman yelled at me: "What? Haven't you eaten enough sausage in Baku? Get out of here! We are first in this queue!" And so, the shop assistant sold the sausage first to locals. I just left with nothing, except tears in my eyes … We really regret that we came here (*cries*). But, this humiliation was nothing: my only brother died in this useless war…"

Alina's excerpt highlights that, despite belonging in theory to one people, localism and nationalism and the desperate search for food and survival led to divisions within this people. The excerpt also shows how everyday life situations under extreme conditions are negotiated differently, and that while some boundaries are transcended other boundaries are established to create a positive self-image of the group (Tajfel 1982). Noteworthy here is that defining ethnic identities in terms of social interaction within and outside group boundaries rests on the logic of difference and belonging – who belongs to the group and who does not. As becomes obvious in the above example, it is a process in which locals, as one group, distinguish themselves to their own advantage from Armenians from Azerbaijan, and so construct Azerbaijani Armenians as the 'other' in this particular context. Difference is also organised hierarchically (Brah 1996). Karabakh Armenians had previously had a lower status than Azerbaijani Armenians and were perceived as 'poor', but now they appeared in a slightly elevated position by providing refuge to their own people who formerly had a better position.[10]

Before the conflict started, the Azerbaijani Armenians were well known to the locals in Martuni as *dachniki*, because they used to travel from metropolitan towns in Azerbaijan during the summer to visit their parents, grandparents and other relatives. During the Soviet period, and because of their highly urbanized culture, they received a great deal of positive attention and even gratitude for the expensive gifts that they gave their relatives when they came to visit Martuni. However, with the start of hostilities, their situation changed: they became degraded, marginalized and ejected from their houses in Azerbaijan, which meant that

they had lost everything, including the basis for their elevated status in Karabakh. What remained was only the memory of a well-to-do urban lifestyle, and their professional skills, which did not help in NK.

As they were accustomed to different lifestyles, many Armenian women from Azerbaijan suffered from culture shock upon their arrival, even though they had spent most of their summers in Martuni during the Soviet period. Suddenly, they had to satisfy and get used to rural patriarchal norms in order to survive and feed their family. In Azerbaijan, they had grown up under fairly liberated and equal gender relations, at least in public and in line with the Soviet model, but in Martuni everything changed. In Azerbaijan they had full-time jobs and received a salary that allowed them to buy food and clothes, but now they had to get used to a life of poverty, as Sona tells us:

> "I donated blood, took care of chickens, prepared food – did almost everything and it stressed me out. I've lived like this for the past three years. If I could live on my teacher's salary, I'd be very happy. However, I need to do this stifling housework: feed the cows, chickens, ducks and sheep ... My son wants to take music lessons, but instead I send him to take care of our sheep. I want him to study, but I also need his help."

In addition, it seemed that the shortage of food and a general scarcity of resources became the foundations of their marginalisation in NK and led to an alienation from their surroundings. In speech, the signs used to differentiate locals from 'Armenians from Azerbaijan' are articulated with re-invented terms. For example, instead of using the Armenian word for newcomer, locals used *galma*, the Turkic word for newcomers. As indicated above, in Soviet times they were welcome every summer since many of them had relatives, parents or grandparents rooted in Karabakh.

> "In Karabakh, they called us '*galma,*' and in Armenia they scolded us for speaking in Russian and not Armenian."

As Karina's interview excerpt indicates, variations in the way that language is used is another contributing factor leading to everyday marginalisation and prejudice. Armenians from Azerbaijan also tended to use the Russian language interchangeably with the Armenian Karabakh dialect as their native language. As locals could easily notice these differences, they often refrained from interacting with Armenians from Azerbaijan, because they not only had lived too long in a Muslim society and acquired different practices and behaviours, but they also spoke Russian as their mother tongue. Thus, these internally displaced Armenians were called *shrurtvatz hayer* ('not quite' Armenian or 'inside out' Armenians) by Armenians in Armenia[11], who would tend to think along the following lines:

> "…although you call yourself ours [belonging to the Armenian nation], you use alien languages, Azeri and Russian languages, like your native language, which was the most noticeable thing that shocked so many Armenians. Despite the conflict, you still sympathise with the enemy."

Post-conflict transformations: emotions, loss and changing gender status

On the whole, Karabakh society underwent drastic transformations during the war of 1991-1994. With the economy devastated, many male adults who survived the fighting left the region in search of new job opportunities. Whereas the stability of the Soviet Union permitted men to return home on a regular basis as well as send remittances back home, the newly established borders made this more difficult.[12] This, however, is not confined to NK and its conflict. Yalcin-Heckman (2012), for example, explores how the logic of new citizenship regimes made border crossing for social economic reasons difficult in post-socialist regions such as the South Caucasus.

Just like the century-old migration patterns of men as 'breadwinners' migrating to support the family, men now also tended to leave the region in search of a wage. However, as occurred during other transition periods, men who migrated were often unable to find a place

to live and hence could not take their families with them to the new host country – making it necessary to send remittances instead. However, some men were unable even to do this: it was difficult for them to earn enough abroad to sustain themselves. For these men, visits and contacts with the family in NK became rarer—or even stopped altogether. Thus, some wives became temporary heads of the family, and virtual grass widows[13] (*mardy sagh irphiveri*) in a patriarchal society where their "husbands tended to scatter along the road" (Kosmarskaya 1998, 50). This process affected local Armenian women and Azerbaijani Armenian women alike. As an expression which has found its way into everyday language in NK, 'grass widow' demonstrates how commonplace this situation has become. Although these changing patterns of dependency have become everyday norms in contemporary NK, societal discourse nevertheless considers women heads of households to have become *'too much like men*' ('vyrtsykezar'[14]) in order to sustain their family.

As a result, those so-called grass widows (*mardy sagh irphiveri*) suffered emotionally from this lonely condition and often used expressions as "vanished without trace", "our home is without a head, a master" (in the Karabakh Armenian dialect, *khetsala mar mytal, thoghal mez andar-ynderu*); "he spoiled my whole life" (*baxtys sev a yral; kyankys phuch a*). A typical example of this feeling of incompleteness is found in the following excerpt from an interview with Margo, a local Karabakh woman:

> "He [Margo's husband] left at the beginning of the war, in 1990. Life became bleak. I had to learn to live in poverty ... to get used to long hours of waiting in queues and seeing empty shelves in stores. This learning was so painful that I often cried … everything happened so suddenly. He always protected me against everything and everybody – he was such a good provider for me and our children, I never knew problems before! Why, why did I have to go through this at the end of my days?!"

As Margo's interview excerpt demonstrates, like many of these women, Margo could not overcome the feeling of leading an incomplete life. This feeling originates from those

internalized traditional gender norms with which these Armenian women grew up. As the family is seen as an extremely important value and symbol in Armenian culture, the only female life-strategies that are approved and promoted are those which include the creation of a 'complete' family, marked by the presence of husband and children (Beukian 2014; Ishkanian 2004; Shakhnazarian 2011; Ziemer 2010). Subjectively, these women did not feel overjoyed; in fact they reveal a sense of embarrassment: "A woman should not have to deal with these things. Her prestige suffers, too much" (literally, her 'honour drops' — *pativyt yngnuma*) (Gayane, local in Martuni). The degree of newly-gained emotional liberation that a woman can get when her husband regularly sends remittances or when she proves successful in her own economic project still does not compensate for the absence of a man. The reason mainly relates to the symbolic losses suffered by the family, the psychological discomfort felt by women and their children without a man in the house.

Coping by petty trading

Not only did some women find themselves deserted by their husbands, but most women also experienced a loss of the social security provided by the Soviet welfare state, which included healthcare, maternity leave and other benefits for the mothers of young children.[15] Whereas the traditional system of extended family relations functioned well in the Soviet era, it too changed in wartime and post-conflict NK. Although the patriarchal kinship system could routinely and reliably provide protection to women in the past, it could do so no longer. If in peacetime a husband's relatives were willing to help his wife and family during his absence, in exchange for the right and even the obligation to closely supervise the conduct of the women and children, now these relatives were struggling to feed their own immediate family. Thus, a reverse trend from big patriarchal families to smaller families also ensued.[16] Even though, under socialism, many women had worked, many supported the view that women are

expected to take care of the home and family, being 'natural' carers as a result of their reproductive role. It is a 'man's job' to do business. However, because of the breakdown of society in NK and the migration of men, many women who were without their husbands were compelled to look for alternative ways of providing for the family and turned to petty trading.

Overall, and in the post-socialist context, markets and informal economies emerged as states weakened. This post-socialist phenomenon has been a particular focus in recent work on Russia, Ukraine and other post-socialist states (Morris 2011). In Ukraine, for example, informal economic activity is a major source of income (Williams and Round 2007, 207). Furthermore, many publications based on anthropological research have stressed the importance of social networks and the informal economy as characteristic of household strategies for dealing with social and economic change since the end of the Soviet Union (Yalcin-Heckmann and Aiviazishvili 2011).

As the excerpt below from Armine's interview shows, one way of generating an income and supporting their families is to start petty trading. Although, Armine is from Baku, such a strategy was employed by both groups of Armenian women – those local to the region and also the new arrivals:

> "Every week I travel with a group of traders to the wholesale market in Sadakhlo[17] … My husband doesn't send us money, his relatives can't help, my parents are old, and I've no brothers. My children must be fed, dressed and have school clothes."

Trading in general, however, is nothing new in NK, although in Martuni, at least before the conflict started, it had historically been male-dominated. While it may appear that petty trading is a specific strategy practised by Armenian women in order to feed their children, it has also been a fairly widespread coping strategy used by women in other post-socialist regions (Cassidy 2013, Pickup and White 2003). Scholars focusing on everyday practices in post-socialist regions mostly discuss this type of strategy as unemployment relief

(Yalcin-Heckmann 2007, 277), but we see it merely as a survival strategy which at the same time enables Armenian women to cross gender boundaries.

By travelling to markets such as Sadakhlo to buy products which they then could sell on in Martuni, these women were transgressing historically-formed gender roles out of necessity. It does not mean, however, that this practice was accepted in the wider society. Men tended to perceive such women as competitors who were actively trying to make money and enrich themselves, as opposed to trying to feed their children. However, such attitudes on the part of men towards women entering business have also been observed in other post-socialist states.[18] In the interview excerpt below, Robert, a 43-year-old local businessman describes how he feels towards these 'new' businesswomen.

> "My work became too difficult because of so much competition. The mini-vans now run directly to Sadakhlo. Anyone who wants to, even a woman, can catch a ride and return with merchandise. This newly-formed 'businesswoman' S. is truly a pest![19] She brings down the prices. Instead of pretending to run a business, she should stay at home; take care of her children and kitchen. As if it wasn't hard enough already for men to earn a living and sustain their families, these women are now sneaking into our business!"

Despite their economic successes, in cases where the husbands are absent women also come under intense scrutiny and invasive control on the part of their husband's relatives, neighbours and the community as a whole. This is perhaps one major aspect that has led in particular to the marginalisation of newly arrived Armenian women, although local women have also been affected by these practices. The differences between the two groups were that local Armenian women had a better standing in the community, while the newly arrived were more distrusted because of their 'freer' and different behaviour.

Generally speaking, relatives kept an eye on the wife and somehow managed to report back to the husband through informal channels of communication (word of mouth) to keep them informed about the behaviour of spouses, children and above all adolescent daughters. Lefebvre's (1999) study of two villages in Pakistan has also shown how women's seclusion is

reinforced by their husband's migration to the Middle East, the husband maintaining control at a distance through other male relatives. In some cases such surveillance has also resulted in groundless accusations when relatives envied these 'successful' businesswomen and sometimes it has even led to divorce. Noteworthy here is that out of a total of 112 divorces registered in the Martuni district court from, 1990-1999, in 15 cases it was the women who initiated the divorce procedures, claiming that they had lost all contact with their former husband.[20] According to the District Judge and the Civil Registry official in Martuni, the divorce rate has increased considerably over the pre-war rate.[21]

To sum up the above discussion, it can be said that in the lives of these women two contradicting gender discourses run parallel. Women have gained more individual autonomy by doing 'men's' work, by trying hard to feed their children without the help of their husbands or relatives. Nonetheless, the community's evaluation of these efforts is typically ambivalent. On the one hand, the opinion is: *She had no choice, she's doing this for her children*. This rhetoric acquires the gender narrative of self-sacrifice and sacred maternity, which confirms Armenia's traditional stereotyped gender roles (Shahnazarian 2011). On the other hand: *What kind of a man (husband) is he, who leaves his wife to her own devices?* In the end, *what sort of family is that?!* In sum, the female attempt to find employment beyond household work is considered a direct infraction of the dispositions embedded in the institutionalised patriarchal hierarchy.

Conclusions: ambivalent gendered transformations

In this paper, we have explored gender as one fundamental but neglected dimension of war and post-war society in Martuni. The rather dreary picture we have drawn touches on only a few of the numerous ways in which the Karabakh war and the ensuing political transformations have affected women and gender relations in post-war Martuni. As we have

shown, patriarchal family patterns were temporarily weakened; the traditional ideals of femininity, silently submissive and restricted to non-waged household work, became too far removed from reality to be sustainable. However, as we stressed in our discussion, some of the marginalisation experienced by those Armenians from Azerbaijan was not gender-specific but rather a result of general shortages at the time of arrival.

In answer to the questions posed at the beginning of the article, our analysis shows that both groups of women, those local to Martuni and those forcibly resettling in Martuni, have negotiated gender roles and identities in similar ways, perhaps because of the overall cultural affinities and familiarity with NK, as well as the shared Soviet past. Furthermore, both groups of women seem to have struggled with similar emotions and feeling of loss when deprived of their husbands. Such emotions clearly stem from Armenian-specific gender constructions and seem to confirm the importance of family and motherhood to Armenian culture (Beukian 2014; Ishkanian 2004). However, such findings also stress the similarity to women in other conflict regions or regions marked by huge political transformations, where it has often been emphasized that women become the centre of the family and bear the economic and social burden of keeping together in times of upheaval (Buckley 1997). In this respect, some women have turned to petty trading as a coping strategy which is similar to that of women in other post-socialist states, who also have struggled with political transformations (Cassidy 2013; Pickup and White 2003). However, whereas in other parts of the post-socialist region, petty trading also led to more independence for women, the women in our study rather considered it a contingent necessity but not something to be pursued forever. Instead, their desire for traditional gender roles, like that of society in general, seems to have gained in strength.

Notes

[1] Most statistical evidence is highly politicised and heavily disputed by both sides. There is disagreement over the exact numbers of refugees and IDPs. Most sources cite a number between 700,000 and 800,000 using data from the UNHCR report of 1997 (cf. Laitin and Suny 1999).

[2] In the context of post-Soviet conflicts, many names are highly politicized. Referring to the entity as (the de facto state of) Nagorny Karabakh, in this article the terms 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' and 'Nagorny Karabakh' are used interchangeably.

[3] Originally from Martuni, she still continues to follow the lives of nine of these women, who are key informants for this project. Most of her fieldwork trips have been self-financed.

[4] This fieldwork trip was funded by the Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS) and was conducted as part of a CEELBAS Postdoctoral Research Fellowship on Migration and Diasporic Citizenship (2009-2011).

[5] Although we are aware that demographic data on the changes in Martuni's population as a result of the conflict would help to illustrate our discussion, we refrain from including this type of data, for most population statistics in this regard are highly politicised and often fail to convey the situation.

[6] According to Ishkanian (2004, 267), the family is central in Armenian culture due to the absence of Armenia's history as an independent state. In the absence of statehood, the concept of 'nation-as-family' evolved in Armenian society.

[7] Furthermore, there is also an increasing number of publications on violence against women and sexual violence as a weapon of war (Leatherman 2011; Kirby 2012).

[8] In order to protect their anonymity, the research participants' names have been changed.

[9] For example, Soviet multiculturalism encouraged the cultural production of ethnic voluntary associations. The aim of the Soviet model of multiculturalism was to ensure the peaceful co-existence of diverse ethnic groups, all groups representing a Soviet people (*sovetskii narod*) (Ziemer 2011: 68).

[10] In this context, it is noteworthy that despite being rejected in most everyday situations, at times, especially at the beginning of the conflict, the first Armenians from Azerbaijan were welcome since they could speak and negotiate in Azeri.

[11] Noteworthy here is that distinctions being made amongst Armenians referring to their closeness to the homeland are nothing new and have been emphasised by Armenians throughout history and in other contexts (cf. Darieva 2012; Ziemer forthcoming). Generally speaking, Armenians who comprise the diaspora call themselves *Spiurk* and Armenians from the Republic of Armenia are known as *Hayastantsi*.

[12] Hence, it was almost unavoidable that remittances could not be transferred as quickly or even earned as quickly. Nonetheless, the interviewees stressed that without remittances from abroad people in Karabakh could not survive at all. Noteworthy, here is that there are no exact data on remittances to verify this, but Armenia receives approximately 2 billion USD in remittances every year from the Russian-Armenian diaspora, which is an average of 20% of Armenia's gross domestic product (GDP) (Khachatrian 2008). One may assume that the dependency level in Karabakh is even higher today.

[13] According to the *Oxford Concise English Dictionary*, a grass widow is a woman whose husband is away often or for a prolonged period. In the early 16th century it denoted an unmarried woman with a child, but its current usage emerged in the 19th century.

[14] lit. translates as 'male carrot'.

[15] Whereas in Soviet times, this was a secure way of generating income, in post-Soviet times it was much harder. In addition, many households had lost their men during the war and thus were now dependent on remittances from their family members who worked abroad or had settled in Russia well before the collapse of the Soviet Empire.

[16] This trend, however, has also been noted in the context of industrialisation in other countries. Traditionally, Armenian families were characterised by big patriarchal family communities, although since the 1920s Armenian families have become smaller due to large-scale rural-urban migration as a result of modernisation processes in the Soviet Union (Ter-Sarkisiants 1998: 137-144).

[17] The market in Sadakhlo, a predominantly Azerbaijani-populated village, is situated on the Georgian-Armenian border, and was long known as one of the constant economic hubs in the South Caucasus. The Sadakhlo market has existed since the early 1990s and has been actively operating since 1993. Markets such as those in Sadakhlo are crucial for the economic survival of large sections of the local population (Yalcin-Heckmann 2007, 277).

[18] Salmenniemi et al. (2011) show in their analysis of women entrepreneurs in Russia that a number of their respondents stressed gender discrimination among their experiences.

[19] We do not include this woman's name for reasons of confidentiality.

[20] In 2000-2001, Nona consulted 112 civil lawsuits involving divorce, which is the total number of divorces officially registered at the Martuni District Court in Martuni in the period 1990-1999.

[21] It could be as much as 50 per cent. Moreover, the court proceedings have been considerably simplified in recent years to the extent that it no longer requires the consent of the husband (who is absent in any case) to end

a marriage. We are especially grateful to the District Judge, Lilia Hovhannesyan, and the Civil Registry official, Alina Hakopyan, for their detailed commentaries.

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